

## **The Dress Dilemma by Punzie the Platypus**

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**Summary:** Hopper has the impossible job of getting Jane's Snow Ball dress. When he can't find one at the girls' section of Sears, he enlists the help of a certain Nancy Wheeler to get him out of this dress dilemma. 'Mike . . . said suddenly, "Why did you ask me what my favorite color is?" [Nancy] knew all he could think of was Jane's blue dress. She just smiled mysteriously. "No reason."'

## The Dress Dilemma

*Soli Deo gloria*

**DISCLAIMER: I do NOT own Stranger Things. Or Sears. Or I'll Be Home for Christmas. Or, you know, Eggos.**

Hopper felt completely out of his realm of expertise. He sat in his pickup outside the Midwest Hollens strip mall (the best thing Hawkins had in terms of malls. It wasn't a big fancy mall like the ones in the big cities, but it was 'cool', since all the teenagers hung out there after school and on weekends) and resisted two urges. One was good, one was bad. One, the one he needed to give in to, was to go into that mall and pick out a nice dress for Jane to go to the Snow Ball in (no pressure. Just the biggest night of her life—the only night she would have to treasure for the next three-hundred-twenty-nine days). He *had* to. He was her dad. She wasn't able to since her social outings were limited nowadays. He *had* to go get her one.

The other urge was the bad one, the one he was so tempted to do—to light up a cigarette and get the hell out of Dodge. He wanted to blast out of that snow covered parking lot and stream back out onto Second Street. He wanted out.

But he couldn't. He couldn't go back home to that cabin in the woods with its blazing fire in the hearth and the hopeful eyes of Jane looking expectantly back at him, waiting to see the beautiful dress he promised to buy her. (Why'd he make such lofty, loaded promises? Maybe it was the look on her face when he did so. Maybe he was trying to alleviate his guilt. Maybe he was trying to make up for the past sucky year. Who knew.)

All he knew was that he couldn't go back home without a dress for her; he also knew he couldn't get out of the car. He had no idea what to look for; he wasn't even sure what size would fit her; he didn't want questions raised: anyone who looked at him would recognize him from the newspaper pictures from the Will Byers story of last year; that's Chief Jim Hopper; why is he shopping in the girls' section of Sears? Imagine the imagination people would use. They'd take one look at him and run with it; rumors would spread; people would

approach him with polite exteriors and ask subtle questions as they nosily tried to figure out the truth. He neither wanted to tell them the truth or come up with snappy answers to their nosy questions. He wanted them to not *exist*.

He sat in his pickup with the engine running to keep him warm, Christmas music playing on the radio. *I'll Be Home for Christmas*. He'd been sitting there for an hour, dealing with this dilemma. Was it a moral or ethical dilemma? It was surely a sticky situation that he found himself landed in, and he hated it. He wanted it to be over.

He couldn't go over or around it. He had to go through with it. So he sighed, whispered to himself, "That kid better appreciate this," and turned off the engine. His boots marked the greying snow with muddy footprints as he crossed the parking lot to the mall. With his odd Chief's schedule, he was off here on a Tuesday afternoon. Granted, it was two Tuesdays before Christmas, but still. He'd chosen the least possible crowded time he knew. He hoped it would work out like he wanted.

Nope. Sears was crowded. It was full of holiday shoppers wearing big coats and toting around heavy bags full of wrapped and unwrapped presents alike. Hopper awkwardly made his way towards the girls' section, hoping that no one would notice him. (That was hard, though. He was taller than 96% of Hawkins and as the only man perusing the girls' section, he stuck out like a sore thumb.)

They were all girls or mothers or mothers with their girls in this section, taking down shirts and examining price tags and deciding if they were worth trying on or not. Hopper meandered towards the dress section, hands in his pockets. He probably looked like a creeper. *He* knew he wasn't; hopefully no one in Hawkins would assume he was.

Looking to his left and his right and seeing no one watching him with surprise, he found a rack full of pretty dresses and starting going through them. What size was El—Jane, again? Was this too long or too short? This one was *expensive*, but was it like *the prettiest dress ever*? Was it worth it? This one had ruffles; this one had shoulder pads. Shoulder pads were for like, young business women, not little girls growing up so much as to be able to go to a middle school

dance, right? This one was silver—did she want silver, or gold, or green, or red, since it was a Christmas dance? Why didn't he ask her these questions? Ugh, he wished he could just bring Jane here. She'd know exactly what she'd want, and he'd buy it that instant for her, no matter what the price tag was. He sighed, frustrated. Would she like this one better, or this one? Was this third one even in the running or not? What about blue? Did she like blue? It had a sash on it. Wait, did he have to buy accessories or something? Did she need new shoes? (Well, *of course* she needed new shoes. She only had sneakers and slippers. Her feet were growing, too. But dance shoes? What kind of shoes did girls dress in?)

"Hello, sir," a pleasant voice said.

Hopper jumped, startled out of his own frantic mind.

"Oh! Sorry! Didn't mean to startle you," said the voice.

Hopper turned to see a woman about Joyce's age wearing a perm and a Sears name tag. Oh, it was just a sales clerk. He breathed easier and said, "It's okay."

"I couldn't help but notice that you haven't picked a dress out yet. Who is it for, and for what occasion? Christmas?" the sales clerk (Sally, according to her name tag), asked pleasantly.

Hopper silently breathed easier. She wasn't out to get him, or find out info to add to the rumor mill. She was just doing her job. And he *needed* someone to take over this job. "It's for my daughter. It's her first school dance, and . . . it needs to be perfect."

"Ohhh, a first school dance. Which school does she go to?" Sally wondered. "Hawkins Middle School? I've got a daughter there. They have a dance called the Snow Ball."

Hopper needed to evade this question. By degrees, she knew everyone at Hawkins Middle. He couldn't lie, because she could easily, with a little digging, find him lying. "This school in Orange County"—the next county over. Hopefully, she knew no one going to any middle school there—"anyway, which one should I get her, you think?"

"Well, let's see," Sally almost shoved him aside (to his relief) to look through the dress rack. He watched her, her eyebrows knit together, search through the rack. "What color does she like? Red or silver or white?"

"I-I don't know," Hopper said. All he'd done was tell Jane he would get her a dress. Neither of them, ignorant since they'd never gone dress shopping, had thought of any kind of details.

"Is she tall or short?"

"Relative to . . . —?" Hopper asked, now feeling very stupid.

"Other girls. How old is she?" Sally wondered. "Is she twelve or thirteen?"

Honestly, Hopper didn't know. Neither did Jane. "She's like, five foot." She'd gone through a growth spurt in the last year. The Eggos were giving her inches.

"Okay. Is she willowy or stout?" Sally asked, trying a dress off the rack to frown at and put back.

Hopper had no idea what the hell she was talking about. He was a man who couldn't understand a woman's language; and honestly, he didn't think he *wanted* to know. "You know what," he said, "I think I'll let my wife do the dress shopping. She's better at stuff like this." Lie. No wife. Well, an ex-wife, but she'd be no help to him. He tipped his hat and backed away. He wanted to get out of this department, out of this department store, and out of this mall. He couldn't do it.

"Oh, are you sure?" Sally said, turning to him. "I'm sure we could find something if I just knew a couple more particulars—"

"No"—he'd told her Jane's height and the fact that she was going to a middle school dance—that was enough information to let slip. He needed to shut up, to protect her from this pleasant, yet—yes, nosy—sales clerk. He backed away. "Thanks, but no thanks."

He didn't stop moving until he slammed his car door shut. He sighed heavily and stuck his key into the ignition. He'd lost this battle, but he'd still fight in this war. He'd get Jane a Snow Ball dress if he had

to suck it up and sew her one by hand.

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He really had to face his failure when he went home to those expectant eyes. She looked at him, annoyed, for a few minutes after he told her. But he pointed a finger at her as he got out his daily beer and said, "You know what we're going to do tonight? We're going to go through the Sears catalogue and pick out a dress. *You* get to handpick it out. What do you think?"

Jane contemplated this answer to their problem. Then she nodded. "Sounds good," she said.

Hopper nodded. It was progress. He didn't throw in the towel and she didn't go full-blast mad on him. Progress.

He certainly felt like throwing in the towel and she felt like giving loose rein to her temper when they were ready to peruse through the Sears catalogue and couldn't find it. They couldn't find a single scrap of magazines or advertising. Hopper, muttering to himself, cursing and annoyed, and Jane, a clear determination in her face slowly giving way to annoyed anger, tore the cabin apart. They break everything out of their spots and spread a layer of mess over the entire house.

"You didn't throw it away, did you?" Hopper asked.

"No," Jane snapped back. As if she could ever be accused of cleaning this cabin up. It was just as much a bachelor pad as Hopper's old trailer was.

Hopper straightened up from the bookshelf he'd thrown apart and sat back on his heels, sighing. "I haven't recycled magazines in forever. Haven't thrown them away. They *have* to be here."

Jane, in the center of the living room, looked around anxiously. If she concentrated, she could find it. Her eyes passed over every inch of the cabin, and suddenly they landed on the roaring fire. Her eyes widened. When her dad lit the fire, he add crumpled newspapers and *magazines* . . .

She pointed a finger at the fire. Hopper said, "What?" and followed where her finger was pointing at. He realized what she meant. He closed his eyes and swore as he stood up. "I must've tore it up when I was building the fire up. Damn." He sighed behind her as they both watched the dancing fire's flames lick up along the firewood. Any newspapers and magazines added had been eaten long ago. "I'm sorry, Jane. I'm sorry."

Jane turned to him. Now was a reasonable time for her to lose her temper on him. He promised, and now he couldn't carry that promise out. Hopper braced for it.

Jane said, "It's okay. You didn't know." She gave him a tiny smile for half a second; it didn't last. She was too sad for it to last longer.

That just made Hopper feel even more guilty. It actually would've helped him feel better if she'd gone off on him. "Look at you, growing up," Hopper said. He enveloped her in a fierce embrace; comforting and protective. He kissed the top of her head. "I promise, I *will* get you a dress for the Snow Ball. You can depend on that promise. Okay?"

"Depend?" Jane wondered.

"Depend," Hopper said. "You leave it to me, and I *will* do it."

"Depend," Jane said softly. She hugged him back.

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Hopper had two different options, both not the best, but also both his *only* options. Number one, he could ask Joyce to pick out a dress for Jane. She was a woman and a mother besides; she'd know what to do. But then, she was a mother of boys—and also, the tiny selfish part of Hopper didn't want to ask her. It was an awkward subject, girls' clothes, and he'd rather not bring it up at all to Joyce. It'd be too awkward, a situation he wasn't uncomfortable with. She'd laugh at him. At least, that's what he thought. He didn't want to look stupid or awkward in front of the girl he liked.

Anyway, his second option was by far the more convoluted one—but it also could be worked out in his head to make the most sense.

He parked his car outside the Wheelers' house and knocked on the door. "Is Nancy home?" He explained to her mother that no, she wasn't in any trouble or anything (after Barb's murder was found out, Mrs. Wheeler took a special worry about Nancy), he just made up some lie about the sheriff's department teaming up with the Hawkins Middle School about some kind of toy drive, and since she was a volunteer at the Snow Ball this year, he needed to talk to her, yatta yatta yatta, etc. etc.

Hopper caught sight of Mike looking over the stairs with wide eyes at him as Nancy, a little confused, came to the front door. "Nancy. Hi. I need to talk to you about the Snow Ball." Hopper's words were slow and polite, but his eyes and facial expression (which Mrs. Wheeler failed to read, thank God) told Nancy that there was more beyond his words he wanted to say. "The toy drive and all that?"

"Oh, yeah, the Snow Ball," Nancy said, catching on, nodding. She grabbed her coat and said, "We're just going to walk around for a little bit. I forgot that I was supposed to talk to him. We have to arrange a drop-off location."

"Oh, all right." Mrs. Wheeler looked relieved. Nancy was volunteering at her brother's school dance *and* helping in community charity. She was doing all right.

Hopper tipped his hat to Mrs. Wheeler and he and Nancy walked a loop around the neighborhood. He explained the situation, how much it meant to Jane to see her brother and go to the Dance, and how important this dress turned out to be. Nancy listened carefully; what little questions she did ask were good, pointed ones.

"So," Hopper finally said, "can you help me?"

Nancy nodded. "Yes, definitely. After all we've been through—after all *she's* been through"—both knew Nancy meant Jane here—,"she deserves it."

Hopper looked relieved. "Thanks."

"No problem." Hopper went into his car and Nancy went into her house, calling some further explanation that satisfied her mother as



she ran down the basement stairs to where her brother was. "Mike?" Nancy called, hand on the railing.

Mike looked up from his walkie talkie. "Why was Hopper here? Is she okay?"

Nancy didn't know if Mike knew Jane was coming to the Snow Ball; she didn't want to spoil anything, so she kept mum about the subject. "She's fine. He just wanted to ask me about volunteering stuff. So, hey," she said, biting her lips, "what's your favorite color?"

Mike looked confused and suspicious. He and Nancy got along better now that they had this secret they kept from Mom and Dad, but that didn't mean they were *close*. "Why do you care?"

Nancy shrugged nonchalantly. "No reason. Just wondering."

"Blue," Mike said.

Nancy nodded once. "Cool." She ran back up the stairs, leaving below her very confused little brother.

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She delivered the brown-paper-wrapped-package personally to his office three days later. He opened it, just to see what a teenage girl who knew what was cool and what wasn't cool anymore would pick out. It was a blue dress with a cranberry sash, long-sleeve and a little shoulder-pad-y and *pretty*.

"I just based her size off what I wore at her age. It should fit her," Nancy said. She handed him a small plastic bag. He opened it to find a palette of eyeshadow.

"Makeup?" he asked, not sure how he should feel. Should he let her wear it or be a good father and ban it until she was sixteen?

"Just a little, soft and pink, won't hurt. I would've died to be able to wear it when I was her age. After all, it's her first dance. Girls loving dressing up for dances. Besides," Nancy said, her arms folded and her lips in a little knowing smile, "she was rocking that punk rock look."

"Yeah," Hopper said softly, finally giving in to this all coming

together, "she was." He got out his wallet and reimbursed her, tucking the receipt into his pocket. "Nancy," he said, sighing, "I can't thank you enough."

"Don't mention it," Nancy said. Without words, her face said, 'I wasn't doing it for you, really. I was doing it for Jane. And Mike, too.' Hopper understood this, and nodded.

Nancy nodded and went to the door. Hopper called before she could open it beyond a crack, "N-Nancy, what kind of shoes . . . ?"

"Flats," Nancy said. Her lips pursed. "Size five or six. Buy both."

"Both. Flats." Hopper nodded. "Okay. Thanks."

Nancy wanted to say something, like, 'You've got this, Chief', but figured he didn't want to hear that from her. She just said, "We look forward to seeing her."

"She's really looking forward to it, too," Hopper said.

Nancy smiled, nodded once, and left the Chief's office, leaving the Chief to look at the unwrapped dress and sigh the biggest sigh of relief of his life.

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When Nancy was driving them home from the Snow Ball, Mike, breaking out of his lover's daze, said, suddenly, "Why did you ask me what my favorite color is?"

Nancy said nothing. She knew all he could think of was Jane's blue dress and how it was his favorite color. She just smiled mysteriously and said, "No reason."

**Thanks for reading!**